

Back Again, Back Again: Running and a Reckoning

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode three: Running and a Reckoning.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: We left out the back of the tent amid a gaggle of the performers, doing our best to blend in. The festival was chaos - evidently, the kings had managed to muster the guard between the time we'd left and now. They stormed through the streets, and although I couldn't well understand their shouting, all brusque Rhysean, there were two words I could parse well enough.

Eligida.

And - *absere*. Missing.

In a break between guards on the street, we split off from the group, Callia's hand in a vice grip around my wrist, and

wound through the streets, doubling back towards the woods and, beyond and through, the long way out towards the countryside. We were so close - I could see the point where streets tapered abruptly into forest - when, galloping around the corner on a pale white horse came -

Cassian.

But not Cassian *my* Cassian. Cassian, dressed for battle. Cassian, helmet pulled low over his head to obscure his eyes and cradle his cheeks.

Omen of death, no? *Pale white horse?*

Mask or no, I knew it was him without ever having to see his face. And, ever the fool, despite everything, despite everything despite *everything*, because the second-to-last choice he made was to choose *me*, I couldn't help but be grateful he was *alive*.

But, all the same, that didn't mean I wanted him to see me. I reached up to grab the edges of my scarf to make sure it hadn't slipped from around my face and averted my eyes. Callia still had hold of my arm, and she tugged me back by my elbow, out of the prince's path, out of the way of two soldiers, neither of which were Hildegarde.

And that - maybe I did feel a spark of shame for what I'd done to her.

Gazes low. Averted glances and backs to the walls along with the others on the street as the prince rode by, dressed for

death. A mother clutched at the elbows of her two young daughters not much unlike Callia did to me, and as they tried to get out of the way, tried to put their backs to the brick and bow, to get on their knees, if necessary, one of the little girls tumbled into me.

Without thinking, I dropped one hand to her shoulder to try and keep her small head from cracking against the brick.

But then the magic - my magic - sparked in me, and my heart sank.

No, I thought. *Oh no, oh no. Not now. Not this.* It hadn't happened more than a handful of times before - I touched someone, magic, long-buried in their blood, sparked back into existence, daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a witch of Rhysea, but - this was not the time. This was not the time. This would give us away.

The little girl gasped, breath hitching in a one-two. Her eyes shot up to mine, wide and wondering, and they glowed golden-bright for a moment and two and three. The magic connected us, and the longer I held on the more I could feel it growing, looking to wrap both of us into something like the beacon of light I'd become after pulling my sword from the *enarbol*.

Eligi- she started to say, her mouth forming the word, but I *shhhhed* her, as quietly as I could, taking my free arm from

where it clutched my hood to put it to my lips. I dropped my head down to my chest and closed my eyes, trying hard to dampen the magic in my chest, and barely managed to pull the glow into something that could be played off as a trick of the light.

So long as -

we -

all -

kept -

still.

Cassian paused, gaze - the place his gaze *should* be, *would* be beneath his helmet - raking over us. I hardly dared to glance up at him beneath my eyelashes, my shoulders hunched and chin tilted down into something that could be taken, in this context, as a sign of respect, rather than fear. The girl's breath caught again as one of her hands reached out wide for her mother's.

Don't look too hard, I thought. Don't look too hard, because you'll see her and then you'll see me and you know the way I stand. You'll realize what is odd, and you'll reevaluate, and you'll know that you are not mistaken. Let us go. Let us be. Help me, one last time.

He stared. Kept - staring -

If any of you see the Eligida, he said, carefully, tell her to come home.

And then he pushed his heels into his horse, and they continued down the street.

The palace was on fire, the last we'd seen of it. It didn't take me long to guess what - who - he meant by *home*.

I hesitated. Callia kicked my shin, grabbing my arm and hissing into my ear. *If you're running back to your prince, eligidida, do it now. Choose your side.*

I chose, I snapped back, pulled from my stupor. *I chose you. I'll always choose you.* I knelt down, shrugging off Callia's arm, and looked the little girl in her eyes.

My magic - I said, slowly. *Yours now, too. I think. You need words, to use it. Be careful.*

I didn't know what she would have, if it would be all of the magic or just a bit, if she would be able to do all the things that I could or if there would be just a word and an action to make her own. I demonstrated sliding my hands past each other, the light glowing dim in my palms. *Now you.*

She copied, and just a spark - a spark - whispered over her fingers. She gasped, eyes going wide.

What - Callia started, but the phrase became something I couldn't understand. *How did* -

Your mother, I interrupted, pointing. *Take care of her.*

Callia stared. And then, hot and furious, she started in on me. I caught next to none of it but *leave* and *child* and

responsibility, the emphasis placed on a different syllable than the kings' accent, and I had to run it through my head three separate times to be sure I'd gotten what she'd said.

What? I tried. *I don't understand -*

She threw her hands in the air and turned to the girl's mother. This was a bit easier to parse - she said it as though she were talking to a wild horse. Expecting her to bolt.

We can care for her. She has the magic.

Magic - the word for it in Rhysean falls something a bit closer to *blood gift* or *talent*, translated literally. I add in the word *the*, now, listeners, to try and make that clear. *The magic.*

Callia raised an eyebrow at me, nodding at the mother, and I offered my hands out towards her. *You, too?*

She hesitantly stepped forward, stretched her fingertips out.

I waited for the magic to spark.

Nothing happened. The world stayed quiet. *I did not make her*, she said with a small smile. City accent, easier to understand. *But she is my daughter all the same.* She turned to Callia. *I will not let you take her. And I will not leave my home.*

Oh - so that's what Callia had meant, all those words I couldn't understand. But what would we have done with a child?

How would a group of people never more than what seemed like five seconds from getting killed raise a little girl?

Callia pursed her lips. *You know the bar, Eligidanim Traem?*

The woman nodded.

If you change your mind. Bring her there. Lower, she added – *do not let her shout her magic just yet. Not until we make the world safe.*

And then Callia was pulling me away, and I had just enough time to turn and drag a closed fist across my shoulders before we whipped around a corner and they disappeared from sight.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. “Nightingales” once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you’re enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you’ll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more!

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are. There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. You are so, so very loved.

I hope you have a wonderful day.